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SUBJECT: IRANIAN HELICOPTERS VIOLATE AZERBAIJANI AIRSPACE -  
ACCIDENT OR WARNING?

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) On February 22, three Iranian helicopters violated Azerbaijani airspace in Azerbaijan's southern Astara region. According to Elchin Quliyev, head of the Azerbaijani State Border Service, three Iranian helicopters violated Azerbaijani airspace by flying over the southern city of Astara for approximately fifteen to twenty minutes. According to media reports, three helicopters, painted white and blue, were sighted in and around Astara. According to a local employee of BBC Monitoring in Lenkoran, some Astara residents initially believed the helicopters to be US helicopters spearheading a US attack on Iran.

¶2. (SBU) While denying that the helicopters had violated Azerbaijani airspace, Majid Feyzullahi, press secretary of Iranian embassy in Baku, confirmed that civilian helicopters accompanying Iranian President Ahmadinejad had flown over the Iranian town of Astara during Ahmadinejad's tour of Iran's Gilan province. (Note: The major towns on either side of the border, in Azerbaijan and Iran, are both named Astara.)

¶3. (C) During a meeting with the Ambassador on February 27, Azerbaijani President Aliyev provided additional insight into the February 22 incident, saying that he had ordered three Azerbaijani military helicopters to violate Iranian airspace on February 26. Commenting on Azerbaijan's retaliatory incursion (in which Aliyev said that the Azerbaijani helicopters flew ten kilometers inside Iranian airspace), Aliyev defiantly told the Ambassador "we showed them - we will defend ourselves." (Full report on meeting septel.)

¶4. (C) While there is no evidence to suggest that this most recent Iranian incursion into Azerbaijani airspace was deliberate, local analysts in Baku believe that it was not accidental, some even speculating that it was a warning for Baku not to support any potential US-led campaign against Iran. Commenting on the incident in the local press, Azerbaijani Deputy Foreign Minister Khalafov said that the IRI had apologized for the incident during his 25-28 February visit to Tehran, Khalafov told the press on March 06 that "we consider that Iran's helicopters did not violate the airspace of Azerbaijan on purpose."

DERSE